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To cite this article: Pablo Arboleda & Pawel Jankiewicz (2022) The Dam of the Damned, *GeoHumanities*, 8:1, 301-316, DOI: [10.1080/2373566X.2021.1942130](https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2021.1942130)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2021.1942130>



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Published online: 07 Sep 2021.



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The Dam of the Damned

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ENTER THE SIGN

Traveling inland. Sounding the region of Metropolitan City of Palermo, toward the *comune* of Blufi. There we embark on a curious sign. We cannot call it otherwise, and to approach it further we need to unpack it, somehow—if necessary—using all the tools the modernist prosthetics equipped us with. We ponder for a while, then reach for three instruments. Device (1) Deconstruction. It's there, in the landscape, but it's not a piece of nature we see. We denaturalize it accordingly, measuring it against a historical curve. Note: *Over the last five decades, Italy has invested in the construction of public works as the core strategy to dynamize its less favored regions; however, due to multiple and inherent dysfunctionalities, many of these remain half-built and abandoned today.* It surely is a construct of sorts, fragmentary and abandoned—the sign ahead of us. And—deconstructed or not—irreducibly out of context here, as if belonging to a different grammar. And so, we re-contextualize it with our Device (2) Ready-Made. The sign has its materiality, but it takes an extra push to make it talk. We check for a precedent, for a test case: *The group of artists Alterazioni Video refer to this phenomenon as “Incompiuto” (“Incompletion” in English), coining a name for a new architectural style where the characteristic unfinished materiality speaks back to Italian idiosyncrasy. In the pursuit of existential dignity, Alterazioni Video suggests that these sites muster and reassemble “metaphysical places of contemplation, thought and the imaginary.” ... Contemplation, thought and the imaginary. We feel we secured the site. Enough to make our move; a move beyond the scaffolding of discourse. We leave the extra gear in our tent, taking only Device (3) Psychogeography. We sketch a quick note, just in case,*

and drop it in the tent—just in case. It reads: *Time for a drift. Here's one of the most spectacular samples of Incompiuto: The Dam of Bluff. We are an architect and a writer, teased by phenomenological qualities of modern ruination, argued in emerging geographical literatures.*

We are ready to enter the sign.

THE DAM OF THE DAMNED

The dam was a bluff
the puffed-out cheeks
of the sun
yet everyone played along
from the start—

pouring tons and tons
of concrete, letting it set
—its truly material side—
in the pockets
of the damned.

Lining them
up.

—True,
people refer to it as a “dam,” but in a deeper truth
—where the flows are—
it was never meant to be one. Strictly speaking
some forms are dumb / dam-like. And dada
and dam-my-ass, *à la manière de ceci n'est pas
une pipe*. It's not a dam, but—an unfinished one.
Voilà.

the dam was a bluff
the puffed-in-and-out cheeks
of a substantial sum

Since the construction
was not completed
this half-built sham can't operate. Now. Because
it already has worked. Somehow. For some people.
The only question

is how.

It never served the purpose . . . put in the official plans.
And received not one single drop of water.



FIGURE 1 ... the buildings don't *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather *rise* as ruins before they are built. R. Smithson, *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic*. Photo: Pablo Arboleda

It vaporized in the smile of that scorching *by-now*.

Architecturally, and paradoxically (because apparently)
it is a form without function. But the appearances lie.
—There's something organized here, which the “dam”
sanctioned.

Namely

the organized crime.

this puffed-up pitch
of the son
of a ...

—At Bluff, there is no magic trick,
the visitor sees, in the full light, all what there is to see: a ruin
that was always a ruin, an unintended
monument

dominating the landscape. A landscape according



FIGURE 2 ... if you are going to destroy yourself, make sure it is for something spectacular. N. Gill, *Your Ruins*. Photo: Pablo Arboleda

to Magritte

the passion
according to the taxpayer

his prayer for water

and the gospel of a son ...

Construction began
in 1990 and was halted
six years later.

After more than two decades
and 260 million euro
what seemed, at first, a temporary interruption
is now a duress
of the infinite.

The non-final.

And this state is quite
 unexceptional
 and should be read as a normative example
 of the failed Italian
 development model

Between the '70s and the '90s—when the economic growth was entrusted to over-ambitious public works. If the goal of modernization was legitimate—construction for the sake of construction was its opposite.

... But hold on.

Was there ever such a goal?

or is Italy in love with its ruins? to the extent of The Dam of Blufi

is the sky in Sicily *a block of air*
where logic and reality curves
warped by a relativity that applies
to more than time and space?—
 to lend a phrase from someone
 like Ballard—air warping the moral

as matter is a result of a bent continuum
 —and

precipitates in a dam, sometimes
 and the damned (as it is usual).

The underlying problems were systemic:

political corruption, mafia connections, bribery and extortion
 clientelism, the disappearing of funds
 design errors, project reformulation, lack of proper coordination
 and the illusion of money for free.

Italy's unfinished buildings and infrastructures are not an accident
 but a demonstration
 of how a few people benefited illegally
 from the public purse.

The unfinished dam is one among hundreds of “white elephants”
 scattered across Italy, north to south.

At Blufi

it was a bluff



FIGURE 3 Maybe the whole of Italy is becoming a sort of Sicily. L. Sciascia, *The Day of the Owl*. Photo: Pablo Arboleda

the puffed-out cheeks
of State-the-Sun

yet everyone played along
from the start—

—until the end
when the Sun set
over the State
and rose over the Market

In Blufi

the dam was a bluff
the cheeky tricks
of the scum
blah, blah, blah, yet everyone played along
from the start. . .

But hold on.



FIGURE 4 These fragments I have shored against my ruins. T. S. Eliot,
The Waste Land. Photo: Pablo Arboleda

Everyone?

The construction was contested
due to its environmental impact
meeting with local resistance.

To conclude and complete would require a further €155 million
(and a priceless consensus)

but time passes and the transitional condition
of what was meant to be a dam
becomes permanent

fixed

Incompletion becomes its own form of completion.

The “dam”
 The “dam”
 The “dam”

is three kilometers distant from the town
 of 10,000 inhabitants
 in inner Sicily.

The road is unpaved

so you do not stumble upon the site
 —unless you are searching for it.

On arrival
 the first impressions are excitable.

And it is like discovering
 the remains of an ancient civilization
 or as if discovering the ruins of contemporary society
 in some near or distant future.

Turn your gaze to the north!
 and picture
 a brutal version of Petra’s temple.

A hill
 carved by a façade of straight lines
 with three mysterious tunnels
 that seem to have no end.

Stand
 at the entrance
 of these tunnels

and feel
 awed

at the prospect of a never-to-arrive *tumbling cascade of water*

To the south!
 the empty reservoir
 bears a passing resemblance

—*Machu Picchu?*
 —*a velodrome? of inclined walls*
 and concrete monoliths



FIGURE 5 I want to reconsecrate things as much as possible. P. P. Pasolini, *Pasolini on Pasolini*. Photo: Pablo Arboleda

—a creation?
 extending to a vanishing point—?

It exists entirely
 it is panoramic
 it is a landscape painting *and panting* of a sublime beauty

combining chaos and harmony
 tragedy and delight. *In a scam.*
 The wholeness here is a reflection.
 On what humankind
 is capable of.
 And simultaneously – what it is not.

Today, pronouncing Blufi's name is

—a bluff?

It is an incantation

that invokes the spirits of an era characterized by unfulfillment.

unlike other ruins

the unfinished dam is not haunted by past
of inhabitation and use
but by its entirely off-modern future

And by the weathering
—it is pristine. Who knows who was the last one coming this way?
Or when the next passer-by will follow?

the unfinished dam is haunted
by what-might-have-beens
and those distended cheeks
of the global warming

—an architectural miscarriage that died too soon.

And before the coming of the Mad Max Messiah
—to soon to be haunted by humans.

Just prospects, just greed
masked by some growth.
Prospects of crime hidden in jobs.
The only prospects
that truly materialised
are among those

who lined their pockets.

And perhaps among those who resisted—
for whom vanished the prospects of the untouched nature.

It is not a dam
it is a touch

that satisfies no-one.—
Who's that? Whereby he comes?

He's in the birth canal—one of the tunnels
striving, pouring himself
instead of water
into the blinding, into the light, wanting this *out-*



FIGURE 6 I want to abandon the future for the infinity of the present.
L. Hassall, *The Future of Ruins*. Photo: Pablo Arboleda

He came here after a 'hole day of regress
into a Sawyer. Running along Dionysian paths, of dust and concrete
smacking the weeds, the growth on the walls, *burning with sun*
so ancient! turning blocks into sand, under steel *clouds*
—only
to reach a holy-day progress
towards a child.
I Tiresias, although blind
I saw it all, and foretold the rest
with empty, echoing words

“iii-nncooo-mpiuuuuu-u!
iin-coom-piuuuu-toooo!”
—like a Gregorian impromptu, his improvised song sounding the tunnel.

He came through abuse—of-and-by power.
And via seasons, four in one day—treacherous September –

his soles carrying traces through the *piped* concrete, that could lead
 to the Arc—lost, perhaps, *out-* – He brings: bits of a broken brick
 white powder of past, the heat, the time—and scars, after the caps
 of trampled “Oranginas,” thorns of wild thistles and of a village column
 following Christ, and even more “Crodinos”...
 and a picked grape, having a sun haemorrhage
 and now staining ’ desiring fingers, his telling lips—
the stalker’s

he thinks:

“the damned and the damned:
 who is who? in this geometry of dust
 and concrete?”

“the doers *the neglectors*, the victims—or me
 a foreigner that fits the ruin? —behind
 my shades my backpack, and plans—the third man—the stoic
si fractus illabatur orbis, impavidum ferient ruinae
 the no-one who’s fearless—the *only*?
 and who passed by the tall grasses, guiding the entrance
 whispering of water”

“is there oxygen here?”—wonders the sulphur-dioxide
paranoid
 he’s read about Sicily’s deep-earth geology, too much perhaps
 “*you, stalker*”
 “think”

“*a moaning melody, a dreadful dirge, a desperate HAPPINESS*
FOR EVERYBODY
FREE, AND NO ONE
WILL GO AWAY UNSATISFIED!”

“*incompiuto, incompiuto, IN-COMPIUTO!*”

He sees the light, nonetheless. The moist reflex, the narrow path of mud.
 His shoes, moving on, carrying and caring – they saw, today:
 a dead bird under the lack of ’ roof, getting into his deadening auspice
 drawn by a kicked tyre, fitting the templum of this afterimage
 lingering *trash* archaeologies
cleansed by the noon

They saw: a missing piece
 of the scorched land. A dried puzzle:
let’s drink / to thirst / for drought!



FIGURE 7 But come, my friends, as we stand here mourning, do you see the lightning? Imru' al-Qais, *The Mu'allaqah of Imru' al-Qais*. Photo: Pablo Arboleda

Like a sign—a wire that opens
the trap—of being forever out-
“INGRESSO VISITE”

VISITORS ENTRANCE, the arrow
pointing to *random nowhere*. Disaster melts
into comedy

and who's the visitor
going there?

and then

this piercing damned beauty
inhaled from the hilltop
like a morning breath of a giant
drumming his chest, ready for Uranus.



FIGURE 8 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare, the lone and level sands stretch far away. P. B. Shelley, *Ozymandias*. Photo: Pablo Arboleda

“and Cronus, or Saturn
 and all the powers
 that be, that left this mess here, after yet *another*
 Gigantomachy”—he thinks, for in the tunnels thoughts overcome landscapes.
 And then a flash: CUT
before the torsion
 of such a Moebius strip
 “*OF CONCRETE*,” he shouts. And he’s almost out, smelling fresh air, as if for the first time.

“I saw
 the clouds pass between the slabs, azure-dotted
 lit up outline, the evening fading out
 assumptions fading too, like Mary’s, of a local shrine
 so sharp, by now” *he’s smelling ozone*
olive grove and tarmac
 “the first and only time
 I was here, remembering
 memories
 that I never had.”

He's someone

at the end of this tunnel
 which only sometimes
 looks like a giant *eye*
 for then it looks—like it sounds—
 like a throat of a giant—
 like a chant:
OUT-
COME!

A site embodying a ghostly form
 finally functions
 symbolically

though only as a spectre
 and a soliloquy:
 to finish or not to finish? To demolish. Or not to demolish.
 Amid remoteness, what is it good for? Seemingly beyond help
 it may not need any—except from nature *except from nature*
 which is reclaiming it

The wind hits the bushes and their dance brings a whisper in our ears . . . *Let it die peacefully. . . Let it go. . .* Time is an ally that makes concrete crumble. Gravel and cement slowly swallowed by earth. *For dust though art and unto dust shalt thou return*—even the greatest constructions expose the insignificance

of ours

Accept this as a worthy fate, the entropic victory
 of the ruining ruin
 that it has been ever since

CECI N'EST PAS UN DAM
 a sign in Sicily

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Hayden Lorimer. For everything.

FUNDING

The fieldwork conducted for this research took place while Pablo Arboleda was a doctoral candidate funded by the scholarship “Thüringer Graduiertenförderung,” granted by Bauhaus-University Weimar (Germany). The materialization of the present contribution has unfolded while Pablo Arboleda was a post-doc at the University of Glasgow, funded by the Urban Studies Foundation.

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